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ABSTRACT

High school debate style should emphasize persuasion, information, and logic above other skills. Recent trends, such as excessive speed of delivery and excessive amounts of evidence used in debate, have tended to inhibit the effective acquisition of those skills for students. Potential methods for moderating speed and evidence use are not allowing judges to read evidence after a round except to settle ethical questions and having judges express their basic philosophies regarding judging and/or debate (including their thoughts on speed of delivery and evidence requirements) at the beginning of each round. (SRT)

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"Back to Basics in Debate"

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CS 505 325

I was initially very hesitant to title this paper, "Back to Basics in Debate". Having long considered myself a liberal, and having allied myself with liberal causes all of my life, I was reluctant to associate my name with a paper which on the face of it would appear so conservative. But the more I discussed the issues with my colleagues and students, and the more I researched and thought about the importance of the involved issues to the educational goals of our activity, the more I found myself supporting my assigned resolution: THAT THE STYLE OF HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE SHOULD PLACE MAJOR EMPHASIS ON PERSUASION, INFORMATION, AND LOGIC ABOVE OTHER SKILLS.

This paper will discuss the reasons that the above mentioned skills should be paramount in high school debate, some recent trends which have tended to inhibit the effective acquisition of those skills (or to place greater emphasis on other skills) for students, and some possible ways to return those skills to their proper place of emphasis in our activity.

The resolution I have been assigned identifies "persuasion, information, and logic" as the three skills which should receive the most emphasis in debate.

The importance of persuasion in debate seems almost self-evident. It is supported by just about any debate text one can examine. Ray Weisenborn, for example, maintains

...the best solution to the problem, as perceived not only by the advocate but also by the judge of that clash, is going to be made by drawing upon the mass of persuasive efforts directed toward that problem. Thus, persuasion is at its apex of perfection within the parameters of formal debate.(1)

Further, in "A Program of Speech Education", reprinted in The Quarterly

Journal of Speech, it is stressed that "the teaching of advocacy is THE ESSENTIAL PURPOSE OF SCHOLASTIC DEBATE" (emphasis added). (2)

"Information" (which I interpret as the ability to inform an audience) is so obviously at the heart of all communication that none would deny it an essential place in debate, an activity built around the skills of oral communication. Explains William Southworth, "I take it as a given first principle that an essential feature of the activity, the foundation upon which it is constructed is effective oral communication." (3)

Logic, too, especially as it applies to critical listening and thinking, has historically (and justifiably) been claimed as a skill enhanced by interscholastic debate experience.

Probably more important than the intellectual justification of the role of the above mentioned attributes of debate is the simple fact that former debaters are virtually universal in their praise of the value of the activity- especially in terms of the skills of persuasion, information, and logic. I expect that there are no persons in this room who have not had a former student return to thank them for their help in transmitting to the student through debate the priceless abilities to communicate clearly and accurately, critically listen and analyze, and cause others to accept their opinions. (In fact, you've probably been visited many times!) I would maintain that the post-activity value of a skill may be the best measure of its true worth.

If persuasion, information, and logic are so universally supported as essential elements of debate, what controversy can be associated with their support as skills worthy of emphasis above other skills? The answer is that support of the above skills appears to conflict with

certain trends in scholastic debate which we shall examine next.

Effective attempts at persuasion and effective attempts at transmission of information are both diminished by the first counterproductive trend in contemporary debate which we shall examine- excessive speed of delivery.

The level of speed in a particular debate may vary, of course, depending on the part of the country in which one views the debate and the particular round one is observing. I believe it is fair, however, to generalize that the pace of debates has been increasing over the years in high school debate.

For documentation, it is necessary to turn to studies of collegiate debate since none (to my knowledge) have been undertaken on the high school level. While I recognize that high school and collegiate debate may differ in significant ways, I believe that the increasing speed on the high school level parallels, though probably not to the same degree, the trend toward greater speed of delivery in collegiate debate. I further believe that as long as there are college debate workshops, college judges at high school tournaments, and college debaters who become high school coaches, the positive and occasionally negative parallels between the two activities will continue.

In his study of the NDT Final Rounds between 1968 and 1980, Kent Colbert concluded:

It may come as no surprise to many patrons of contemporary debate that speaking rates have increased dramatically over the past 13 years... The average of all debaters observed in this study has risen from 200 WPM to 270 WPM. (4)

But is that too fast to be persuasive or clear? The obvious an-

swer seems to be "no". Colbert makes the point:

If rapid rates of speech were incomprehensible or less persuasive, it is doubtful whether any of the teams in this sample would have made it to the final round of the NDT.(5)

Bert Bradley seems to agree when he observes that:

Although some are critical of a fast rate of speaking, so long as the speaker can articulate sounds in a comprehensible way and it is appropriate to the situation, there seems little justification for antipathy to a fast rate.(6)

Others point to studies of so called "compressed speech" for support and explain:

...some authorities argue that since listening rates may be 400-800 WPM, a public speaking rate of 200 WPM is not unrealistic.(7)

Colbert even goes so far as to suggest:

The activity of debate can serve as a valuable testing ground to observe the boundaries and limitations of rapid speech delivery in public speaking situations.(8)

But before we jump on the (speeding) bandwagon, we'd better stop and compare the "typical" high school debater to the "typical" NDT finals debater. As Bradley's earlier statement qualified, speed is acceptable "...so long as the speaker can articulate the sounds in a comprehensible way and it is appropriate to the situation..." . That qualifier does not describe many of the fastest high school debaters I have encountered.

Speed is obviously anti-persuasive and anti-informative for debaters who lose fluency (or coherency) as they speak faster. If, however, the debater is capable of enormous speed with incredible articulation,

(Bradley's second qualifier comes into play. The speed must be "appropriate to the situation". Ehninger and Brockriede explain, "The rate of utterance while fast enough to retain interest, must be adapted to the capacity of the listener to follow and understand."(9)

So, the key concept is not that speed is always non-communicative and non-persuasive (depending on the audience, it may be quite persuasive), but that a persuasive speaker should vary the speed to fit the audience.

This causes obvious problems for speakers who are unfamiliar with the audience/judge. Should they speak quickly or slowly? When in doubt, for reasons we'll discuss later, most speakers seem to assume that the judge would prefer a rapid debate.

Many debaters certainly don't seem concerned that they are exceeding "the normal public speaking rate according to a synthesis of studies... (of) 125 to 190 WPM..."(10) which Wayne Thompson has identified. Nor are they concerned that they are violating Raymond Ross' statement that, "In general, a rate in excess of 185 WPM is too rapid for a normal public speaking situation, and a rate of less than 140 WPM is too slow."(11)

Generally, then, it would seem that the trend toward more speed in high school debate is always counterproductive to effective persuasion and information transmission if inarticulate delivery results, and may be harmful to persuasion and information transmission even if the delivery is articulate. Keefe, Harte, and Norton make the point forcefully in the following admonition to debaters:

Muttering, babbling, screaming,

(shouting, and rapid, incoherent utterances have no place in purposeful debate... Judges should also not have to serve as stenographers, taking down your two hundred fifty words-per-minute arguments, then working frantically after your speech in an attempt to figure out what you were talking about.(12)

In addition to potential problems that speed can cause in the round, there is a very serious "real world" concern for the impact that speed can have on the image of our activity. I expect that most of us in this room have had to answer the question from a perplexed parent or administrator, "Why are they talking so fast?" While we may have been able to give a relatively reasonable answer, the damage to the image of the activity had already been done because the statement behind the question was, "They're talking too fast." Further, unless the students are sufficiently sophisticated to adapt their speed to the audience, we have done a disservice to the students by actually teaching them to speak badly in some situations. I fear that this second concern may be justified more often than we care to admit.

An interesting side question is, if there is a potential danger of judge backlash from rapid delivery, why do so many debaters continue to speak rapidly?

There are several potential answers. The debaters may have seen successful teams that spoke very rapidly and are simply trying to copy their style. Or perhaps the debaters fear that the unknown judge about to hear them is a "flow sheet" judge who expects them to extend every argument and every piece of evidence in the round. (If the judge is a known admirer of speed, to speak slowly quickly would be nonpersuasive.)

(Both of the above reasons are probably true to some extent with many debaters. But there is another reason for speed which we should add to this list which we will discuss in more detail. I consider it the second major trend in contemporary debate which inhibits the effective acquisition of persuasion and information skills. Additionally, in its extreme, it also tends to reduce the use of logic and reasoning. The trend is toward the use of excessive amounts of evidence in debate.

Please understand that I totally support the use of reasonable amounts of evidence in debate; evidence is a critical element of persuasion. But when the evidence rather than the arguments becomes the central focus of the debate, a serious distortion of the appropriate role of evidence in debate has taken place.

This "don't say it if you can't document it" and "it must be true if you can document it" philosophy tends to encourage speed. Austin Freeley explains:

Experienced varsity debaters operating in tournament situations on the national circuit are under great pressure to pack as much evidence and argument as possible into time limits. Their delivery may often exceed 200 WPM.(13)

Unfortunately, Freeley's recommendation of a potential solution to the problem is not often followed:

Rather than using three pieces of evidence, and delivering them at too rapid a rate for easy comprehension, it would be better to use one well chosen piece of evidence, integrating it carefully into the case and helping to drive it home by use of an effective rate.(14)

Not coincidentally, the possible causes of excessive evidence use overlap with the previously discussed possible causes of excessive

speed. Both copying successful teams and fear of high evidence expectations from the judge may encourage use of a great deal of evidence just as they may encourage speed of delivery.

But an equally important impetus to excessive evidence use is that there is so much evidence available. Of course, there has always been a virtually unlimited amount of evidence available for hardworking debaters, but it has never been as easily available to even the least ambitious of high school debaters as it is now.

The proliferation of handbooks, supplements, magazines, and packaged briefs guarantees that any debater willing to invest the money will have something (probably too much) to say about just about anything.

Squad evidence systems, evidence exchanges with other schools, and, oh, yes, primary research, add to the quantity. And the investment of all that time and effort (not to mention money) causes the debaters to want to use their precious "cards".

Unfortunately, speed and its potential inhibition of persuasion and information transmission skills is not the only potential damage caused by excessive use of evidence. Logic, the third element in the trio of skills this paper is examining, is also potentially harmed by excessive use of evidence.

The primary culprits here are prepared briefs (whether purchased or "homemade") and generic arguments.

Here, too, I must qualify my stance by expressing my belief that briefs, and to a lesser extent, generic arguments when used with flexibility can foster excellent critical listening and thinking skills. (For example, the decision not to use a particular brief in a particu-

lar round is frequently as powerful a demonstration of good reasoning as the decision to use another brief which proves to provide a winning argument in the round.)

But no logic is demonstrated by a debater who hears the title of a case then (in a "knee jerk reaction") grabs a stack of briefs that may apply and non-selectively reads everything on each one as fast as he can until his time expires. Generic arguments, especially generic disadvantages and counterplans are the extreme examples of this same problem.

A large quantity of briefs or generic arguments allow weak debaters to convince themselves that they are debating when they have, in fact, demonstrated no original thought in the round.

Since most would probably agree with my belief that critical thinking is one of the most important skills our activity fosters, I would hope that they would also agree that to the extent that use of evidence inhibits thinking in the round, it is counterproductive to one of the primary skills debate should teach.

Having established that persuasion, information, and logic should receive emphasis above other skills, and that excessive speed of delivery and excessive use of evidence inhibit the effective acquisition of those skills, the last task of this paper will be to discuss some potential methods of moderating speed and evidence use so that the acquisition of the skills worthy of primary emphasis will be better realized.

The first proposal is far from revolutionary, having already been implemented at both the NDT and NFL National tournament. The rule against allowing judges to read evidence after a round except to settle

ethical questions should be universally implemented and followed.

Ours is an oral communication activity. As William Southworth recently maintained in an excellent paper on the subject:

Unless and until we consciously wish to restructure this activity, debate will remain for me a contest which attempts to judge the relative effectiveness of various individuals' ability to orally communicate ideas and arguments. (Emphasis in original.) (15)

The oral nature of the activity is assumed by Keefe, Hart, and Norton when they caution debaters that:

If a judge does not understand your arguments immediately upon their presentation, you should expect those arguments not to have impact in the debate until they are clarified.(16)

However, if the clarification is after the round, it becomes less necessary to be clear during the round.

In short, as long as debaters can depend on judges to read evidence after the round, they have little incentive to read it articulately during the round, and all the incentives previously discussed to speak quickly. But, as Southworth explains:

If the debaters knew that a judge would not base a decision upon any other materials than what he heard and understood, it would simply make good competitive sense to alter the nature of their appeals. Within that alteration, I suspect, would be the promotion of many more valuable rhetorical skills than we now are able to locate.(17)

Southworth further proposes a companion rule equally worthy of our endorsement and universal application:

I would urge similar rules for the debaters themselves. Surely one reason why judges have been left so far

(
behind in attempting to understand the oral presentation of arguments and evidence during the debate is that the debaters, similarly mystified, have been frantically trading written materials back and forth during the round.(18)

The two rules in combination would simultaneously encourage debaters to slow down and better employ their persuasive and informational skills, and encourage them to make strategic choices about which evidence and arguments to use at the reduced pace- thus restoring critical thinking and logic to a more prominent role in the debate process.

One of the essential elements of persuasion to which reference has been made on several occasions in this paper is the importance of adaptation to the audience or judge. We judges cannot, however, expect teams to adapt to our debate philosophies or concerns if they are unaware of them.

To allow debaters to practice what we teach, I, therefore, strongly recommend that judges take a short time (probably two minutes or less) at the beginning of each round to express their basic philosophies regarding judging and/or debate including but not limited to thoughts on speed of delivery, evidence requirements, judging paradigms and so forth.

This presentation would fulfill the dual functions of providing teams with information so that they could adapt to the judge if they so chose, and warning teams of the judge's concerns so that the judge would have clear justification for penalizing teams that were non-adaptive.

While the above recommendations would all be positive steps toward moderating excesses (in speed in particular), I believe that one other

major barrier still stands in the way of returning persuasion, information and logic to their appropriate role in high school debate. That barrier is the sometimes staggering incongruity that too frequently exists between what many of us philosophically believe as teachers, and what we pragmatically do as judges.

I believe that it is fair to say that many- perhaps most- high school coaches agree with the basic thesis of this paper that excessive speed of delivery and excessive use of evidence should be discouraged in high school debate. I further expect that there are many students who are in total agreement with their coaches on this point (which may be at least part of the reason for the growing popularity of Value Lincoln/Douglas Debate).

If the support for the control of debate excesses is so significant, why do the excesses continue?

I propose that the strongest reason of all may be that most of us have stubbornly refused to use the most powerful tool at our disposal to shape the future of debate- the ballot.

For some reason (perhaps fear of appearing unreasonable or old-fashioned), when we receive a ballot, we take off our teacher's hat and put on our judge's hat, rather than wear both simultaneously. Locked into paradigms that usually center on issues and evidence rather than style or educational value, we frequently reward teams for doing the very things which we have counseled our students to avoid and have decried in informal conversations with our colleagues.

The one stereotype that seems to almost universally apply to debaters is that they tend to be intelligent. As long as we vote in the round on issues that are enhanced by speed or great quantities of evi-

dence, intelligent debaters will continue to ignore our pleas for persuasiveness. Only when the power of the ballot supports our philosophies will the debaters be sufficiently impressed that they will seek and adapt to our requests.

I do not propose that we throw out all of the judging paradigms that have evolved so reasonably from so many different perspectives over the years. I simply invite coaches and judges who occasionally witness excesses in debate to add a new reason for decision to their already existing paradigm.

The title of this basis for decision is unimportant, but for the purposes of discussion, we shall call it an "Ethical Voting Issue". If in the opinion of the judge, one of the teams in the round is using debate practices which are either, 1. potentially harmful to the educational values for the students involved OR, 2. potentially harmful to the activity, the offending team should be given a loss on an "Ethical Voting Issue" and that issue should override all other issues in the round.

For obvious reasons, potential practices which might cause the judge to use an "Ethical Voting Issue" in the round should be clearly identified during the statement of philosophy by the judge at the beginning of the round.

An "Ethical Voting Issue" decision would require a high degree of conviction and even courage on the part of the judge, because it would probably not be a particularly popular practice among some of our colleagues. But I doubt that it would take very many "Ethical Voting Issue" rounds to catch the attention of the debaters and cause them to be a bit more moderate in their practices or at least more adaptive to the

audience, and that's all that we are really requesting of them.

(I know that most of you in this room share my conviction that debate is frequently the single most important influence on the participants during their high school years. But I also know that many of you share my concern that recent trends toward excessive speed of delivery and excessive use of evidence threaten to make that influence less valuable.

I believe that the recommendations contained in this paper can be positive steps toward stronger support of the resolution: THAT THE STYLE OF HIGH SCHOOL DEBATE SHOULD PLACE MAJOR EMPHASIS ON PERSUASION, INFORMATION, AND LOGIC ABOVE OTHER SKILLS.

I invite you to join this liberal in supporting the conservative cause of moving "Back to Basics in Debate".

NOTES

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2. Contest Committee of the North Central Speech Association, "A Program of Speech Education", Quarterly Journal of Speech XXXVI, no. 3, (October, 1961), p 354
3. William Southworth, "Thoughts on Evidence Reading and Comprehension", National Debate Tournament Final Round Critique, JAF, Vol. XXL, (Summer, 1984), p 52-54
4. Kent R. Colbert, "Speaking Rates of NDT Finalists from 1968-1980", JAF, (Summer, 1981), p 75
5. Ibid., p 75
6. Bert E. Bradley, Fundamentals of Speech Communication: The Credibility of Ideas, (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown, 1974), p 239
7. Raymond S. Ross, Speech Communication: Fundamentals and Practice, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), p 135
8. Colbert, p 76
9. Douglas Ehninger and Wayne Brockriede, Decision by Debate, (NY, Toronto: Wayne, Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1972), p 281
10. Wayne N. Thompson, Modern Argumentation and Debate: Principles and Practices, (NY: Harper and Row, 1971), p 273-4
11. Ross, p 135
12. Carolyn Keefe, Thomas B Harte, and Laurence Norton, Introduction to Debate, (NY: MacMillan and Co., Inc., 1982), p 228
13. Austin J. Freeley, Argumentation and Debate: Rational Decision Making, (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1976), p 304
14. Ibid., p 304
15. Southworth, p 52-54
16. Keefe, Harte, and Norton, p 228
17. Southworth, p 52-54
18. Southworth, p 52-54